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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 001904

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2014

TAGS: PGOV PREL BF OPBAT

SUBJECT: DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER EXTOLS OPBAT, U.S.

RELATIONSHIP

Classified By: DCM Robert M. Witajewski for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) In his courtesy call on Deputy Prime Minister Cynthia Pratt, Ambassador stressed the importance of Bahamian officials acknowledging OPBAT's importance to Bahamian national security. The Deputy Prime Minister extolled the bilateral relationship and acknowledged that OPBAT was critical to Bahamian national security since the country's could not assure the security of its own borders with only its own resources. She also admitted that Bahamian failure to address the issue illegal Haitian migrants in the country was a long-term time bomb.

End Summary.

The High Cost of Government in The Bahamas

¶12. (C) Ambassador's October 8, twice-delayed, courtesy call on the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister for National Security, Cynthia Pratt, turned into a lengthy substantive discussion of OPBAT's past, present, and future. Ambassador, accompanied by Deputy Chief of Mission, began the meeting by reviewing events since his presentation of credentials, including the arrival of two devastating hurricanes in The Bahamas. The DPM, who was assisted by the Ministry's Under Secretary for Security Matters, Peter Deveaux-Isaacs,

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expressed appreciation for the DCM's efforts as Charge over the last 14 months and then immediately launched into a spirited review of the bilateral relationship and OPBAT's importance to The Bahamas.

¶13. (C) Minister Pratt noted the historical closeness of U.S.- Bahamian ties and observed that even as friends we can disagree on issues, but that The Bahamas knew that it could not protect its borders and maintain its national security without USG material and financial assistance. She also reiterated the appreciation of the people of The Bahamas for all of the assistance that the United States had rendered in the aftermath of the recent hurricanes, as well as in rescuing survivors and victims of the mailboat collision in ¶2002.

¶14. (C) The Deputy Prime Minister called OPBAT "vital" and declared that The Bahamas would clearly suffer if the assets committed to it were to be diminished. She noted that the archipelagic nature of the country required that many essential services (including police, schools, health clinics, airports, and roads) be duplicated or triplicated. This, combined with its small (350,000 inhabitants) population, made it extremely costly for the government to provide the necessary infrastructure, let alone adequate patrolling of its 100,000 square miles of ocean. Even the country's efforts to expand its economy was costly, the Minister observed, commenting that the opening of a new Four Seasons international resort on idyllic, remote, previously-underpopulated Great Exuma island required that a 500 percent increase in the local police force from 16 officers to 86.

Ambassador: OPBAT Needs Your Support

¶15. (C) Ambassador responded to what was clearly a prepared presentation by the DPM by saying that he welcomed the Government's expression of support for OPBAT. He noted that his in consultations in Washington prior to arriving at Post that he had detected "red flags" about the ability and willingness of some USG agencies to maintain current levels of support in the face of competing demands. As examples, the Ambassador cited a review by INL that could result in substantial cuts to the NAS budget in Nassau, the demands for helicopters and their crews used by OPBAT in Iraq and other crisis locations, and the rapidly deteriorating situation in Haiti that could require a large new commitment of U.S. assets.

¶16. (C) Ambassador invited the Deputy Prime Minister or Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell to accompany him on a trip to

Washington to explain OPBAT's mission and importance to The Bahamas and to the United States to members of Congress interested in the Caribbean, key committee members, and Executive Branch officials. Ambassador reiterated that it was important that key officials know that the resources that they were committing to OPBAT were being properly utilized and having the maximum return in the face of many competing demands. He noted that he had begun a program of sending Embassy press releases to members of Florida's congressional delegation to help keep them abreast of events here.

17. (C) Minister Pratt responded that it was Florida that would suffer the most if OPBAT's operations and effectiveness were to be reduced. She noted that while The Bahamas was the first line of defense for the southeastern United States, there was no way that her country could properly secure its borders with its own resources. The Ministry's national security deputy, Mr. Deveaux-Isaacs, added that any reduction in the resources committed to OPBAT would send the wrong message to drug traffickers and migrant smugglers. He recalled that when the U.S. decided to close down its aerostat sites several years ago that there was an upsurge in drug trafficking as drug dealers immediately moved to exploit what was perceived to be a diversion of interdiction assets from the region. He said that he hoped that history would not repeat itself.

Impact of Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne

18. (SBU) Turning to the impact of recent hurricanes on The Bahamas, Ambassador observed that it was particularly important to provide relief assistance to the poor Haitian community, particularly those living in settlements in Marsh Harbor, Abaco, called "The Mud" and "Pidgeon Pea." Minister Pratt responded by acknowledging that the issue of illegal Haitians in The Bahamas was a problem that had been "postponed twenty years too long." She claimed that the U.S. needed to recognize that the goal of Haitian migrants was not to live in The Bahamas, but rather to eventually enter the United States. Characterizing the Haitian problem in The Bahamas as "a cancer," she recalled that during her election campaign that she was shocked to discover that some neighborhoods in her own parliamentary district were almost "85 percent Haitian." Unless The Bahamas came to terms with this issue, the Deputy Prime Minister continued, the country faced the prospect that someday Haitians could "outnumber Bahamians" in their own country.

19. (SBU) Discussing relief and reconstruction efforts, Ambassador explained to the DPM that the Embassy was working closely with the local representative of the Inter-American Development Bank, as well as with the British embassy (as the local presence of the EU) to avoid any duplication of effort. Ambassador also noted that he was lobbying hard in Washington to assure that The Bahamas received its fair share of funds from the Administration's supplemental appropriation.

10.(U) Ambassador also briefly reviewed other areas of U.S. assistance to The Bahamas, including working on revitalizing the sister city program, expanding training opportunities for Bahamian law enforcement officers with the FBI. The Deputy Prime Minister then reiterated her long-standing concern about the importation of guns from the United States into The Bahamas and the impact that this had on the level of violence associated with criminal acts in the country.

Comment

11. (C) The Deputy Prime Minister's presentation of OPBAT's importance to Bahamian national security -- and contribution to U.S. national security -- was clearly rehearsed. Ambassador has stressed to Bahamian officials the importance of them making clear their appreciation for what OPBAT does for them and their country and the danger that taking it for granted could present in an era of zero-sum budgets and the demands for OPBAT resources in other crisis spots around the world.
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